

## Community Video: An Inner Look

### Ken Marsh

*Videoscope*, 1, 2 (1977)

The idea of community video grew out of the late sixties, when those who picked up the camera did so to effect change in the use of technology in communications politically, socially and aesthetically. Community video is defined as self-supporting TV production facilities, operated locally by local people and utilizing cable TV systems for exposure of programs to local fellow viewers. It all sounds so good, like democracy. However, it hasn't quite worked. Dollar support for community video is meagre, production facilities are scant, viewership miniscule, and cable system operators uneven and reluctant in their cooperation.

As a part of the so-called alternate media movement, I have worked in New York City and Woodstock and rural environs on community video projects. I am in the process of shifting my energies and focus away from community video and directing it toward a more personal use of electronic technology in the arts. The conclusions I have reached about community video are a result of almost eight years of experience. In an effort to document and communicate what has evolved over the past years, I have been talking to and recording interviews with video and non-video people exploring their perceptions of community video.

Here are three interviews recently conducted in the Woodstock area.

VAL CADDEN Woodstock Town Supervisor

Val Cadden, Woodstock's Town Supervisor, has been active in town government for several years and thereby is an overseer of the community video activities. Woodstock's cable TV channel is designated as a town channel. Access is by permission of the town board. She and Woodstock Community Video have been instrumental in the setting-up and programming of the channel. No other group has utilized the channel since its opening in May, 1972 and unfortunately last fall, programming stopped on a regular basis because there was no local dollar support. However, the channel remains available for use. WCV occasionally programs it and the one other user has been a local radio enthusiast who produces music programming when he has time. As WCV relinquishes its role in community video in Woodstock, hopefully other institutions and individuals will pick it up.

Q: In a general way I want to understand what people think community video is. What you think it is?

A: Well, I think community video had a very important role in the town of Woodstock when it was in operation, showing town board meetings, and it was very beneficial when it had the candidates together before an election. I'm very sorry you've had the problems you've had in keeping it going. I know there are so many more things it could be involved with, like the Maverick Concerts-lots of different things that are going on in town-but I don't know how you'd be able to pull it together and get it going.

Q: It's an economic problem. It needs to be supported, especially to take on some of those kinds of productions. The arrangement with the town has been unlike a lot of other towns. Why hasn't the town come through with some real financial support?

A: I know that the last town board was the one that was involved in this. The reason they did not want to get involved any more than they did was that they did not want to enlarge the functions of government anymore than need be. It's the history that when the town takes on a new function, it keeps growing and becomes more and more of an expense to the town. That is why the town did not really get involved in it.

Q: To the extent that the town could have supported programming of town functions like the town board

meetings and election-related programming, why weren't at least the costs there met?

Are those justified costs for the town? I don't think they're justified costs for a town budget to fund this type of thing. We fund legal notices and things like that, but publicity-oriented things I don't think can be a part of a town budget. From revenue sharing, monies might be able to be given, but not to do your town board meetings or your campaigns. Anything for a campaign would have to be paid for by a party. That would not be a town function, either. The town really can't get involved with politics in that way.

Q: How would you see a community video group continuing with what we have started, doing the town board meetings, documentaries on various events. How would you see them funded?

A: Since you are non-profit, this is where there is a real problem. I think it would have to be funded through advertising. One of the businesses in town, or, say the Chamber of Commerce, or someone who would want to fund this and get their advertising at the same time. The Chamber seems like a good one to do something like that.

Q: Being commercial might work against continuing to carry town board meetings, which many people feel are boring and may not want to watch as compared to something along more entertaining lines.

A: That might be very true. Today, the economics are so bad that everyone is really careful. You might have trouble with your merchants being willing to advertise at this point. I think the time is bad and the whole tenor of the feelings of people throughout the country just are not prone to get something new going and really being supportive. I think community video could be beneficial to Woodstock, but I can't think of any way at this point that it could become financially in a position to sustain itself without the outside grant you have.

Q: You've watched and been a part of some of the shows. I get criticism that the programming is amateurish. What are your feelings on that?

A: Well, on some of the shows, sometimes, the audio is not just the way it should be. But, for myself, when I'm looking at an interview or something about the town, people from the town, I myself don't mind if it's a little amateurish, but I know there are other people it does bother. I find one of the charms of it is to see the people I know just the way they are. I enjoy it.

Q: What's been your family's response, generally, to the programming?

A: They would really only watch it if there were something that we were interested in. My daughter would usually be up on it and know what's going on.

Q: The viewership was not all that great . . .

A: I think a lot of people did not even know you were on all the time. I think probably a lot more publicity, I know you tried, but I don't know how you get all these things over to the people. Do you have any idea how many people were watching?

Q: No. The cable mailing list was not made available to us and thus no surveying could be done. The only way to know was through people walking up to us in the supermarket or on the street and making some comment. If there would have been a significant viewership, would that have played a part in the town funding of community video?

A: It might have. Under normal conditions, yes, if it's legal, but, as I said, it just was not the right time for the town to get involved due to the economy. I think if you had announced to the taxpayers that next year you were going to spend another ten thousand on community video, your taxes are going up a couple of dollars, right now, there is no one in town who wants their taxes to go up one penny. Again, I think it's due to the economy.

Q: One more question. The cable company is paying a franchise fee. It comes out to somewhere around seventeen hundred dollars. That money would be a logical resource for funding video activities. It's a small amount and would barely dent the need, but, that money was never made available. Why wasn't it used before?

A: I think last year was the first year it went to seventeen hundred dollars. The year before that, I'm not sure of the figure, but it was a very small amount. I think that came in May. At the time, we were already into the welfare problem for which all our extra funds were needed. Something could be looked into for the future, when we get these other programs taken care of. But I think that's a very good question you ask, and I never really thought of it myself.

JUDI MILLS Videomaker

Judi Mills is a recent graduate of Vassar College, who has worked with video in the Mid-Hudson area and in Boston. She was the first Vassar graduate to produce her major final work on videotape, just this last spring. Now she is working with a community action agency, networking videotaped social service information to Mid-Hudson cable TV systems.

Q: What does community video mean to you?

A: Community video is programming by people in an area to people like themselves in that same area, talking about things that are important to them and what's going on in their particular community. It's community based. It stems from the community and comes right back to it.

Q: Are there any particular technical aspects to it?

A: Generally, it's been the most inexpensive equipment that you can have; 1/2-inch video is something I don't think broadcast TV is quite ready for, and is something that people aren't used to watching -because it is not technically perfect.

Q: You've been involved with a regional programming project, you have worked in Boston with video. What do you think has been the level of success of community video?

A: You certainly get a lot of interest from the people who are doing the community programming, but as to people watching it, I don't think it has had the success that it might have.

Q: If it's not being well-received on the local level, then the concept of community video is short-circuited. Why is that happening?

A: There are a couple of things short-circuiting video. One, I mentioned before, is that the material being presented is not the same quality people are used to watching. It's not always entertaining. It's educational and a lot of people don't like educational television. That's why educational TV now is called PBS, public broadcasting. Another thing is that you are dealing with, for the most part, a fairly apathetic public. They're interested as long as it's their kids who are producing the shows, and as long as it's their cause that's being aired on the community video tube, but otherwise, the quality gets them before the information does.

Q: Do you think that there are enough various factions of the community participating even if it is just to watch their own?

A: No. I think that what you have is, what we were talking about before, throwbacks to the sixties, people who are very into community involvement and want people to be able to make their own environments better to live in. You have younger people who are coming up now who are very excited about having television available to them. But you are reaching a population, a general population, that is more interested in getting themselves fed, whose personal problems are much more important and harder to deal with. What good is community video going to do them? Will it get jobs, cheaper food prices? If not, it's just a boring thing to do, community TV, and so the general public is not involved.

Q: So what are you doing, Judi?

A: I am a throwback to the sixties. But I do it because I like video. I always see things in video as if I were living my life on a videotape. I do it because there's a double edge to the knife. One is that I get my own creative energies out and do what I like to do, which are documentaries, and the other thing is, maybe, there are people out there who are going to learn something from what I do.

Q: If nothing changed in a couple of years in the level of impact that community video has, do you think you would abandon it for other areas of pursuit in this field?

A: My main interest is to be working with children, a two year personal goal. I want to work with them in a community video set-up-the children as the community. Children are always excited about these things. I think I'd always get the positive feedback I need. Now, the question is, if in two years community television is not successful, I am not going to have the money to do that. If I can't support myself doing it, I am going to be frustrated about it, obviously. I probably would try to find some medium, if video did not work to express what I want to express.

Q: Many people who gravitate to community video don't really have a particular purpose or message, it's unclear. It's primarily ego activity. You seem to have a concept in mind that makes community video a tool for you, not just a toy. Talk about it.

A: I would say what I am trying to do, particularly with the job I have now, is to educate people to the basic necessities of a happy life. I know that that sounds corny, but, there are some basic things: a sense of well-being, keeping your body healthy, (that's food and nutrition) and I am interested in that stuff. There are all sorts of people who need to be happier: children, the elderly, and that's what my focus is. I work presenting positive images of people, showing programs that can be of help to people in the community. Most of the stuff I do is not really self-reflective, you know, it is the community reflecting on itself. What I am doing now are as a member of the community programming things that I think the community has to know and that includes more views than my own.

Q: You sound like a social propagandist.

A: Maybe. There is that idealistic bent. I don't really know everything that people need to know to have a real happy life. That's why my television programs include other people than just myself. I am a vehicle, I am the medium. I want people to talk to themselves. It's more important to have people say what they have to say. I don't even like to have my own voice on my videotapes. I don't want people to even hear my questions or my commentary.

JON Berg Sculptor

Jon Berg is a sculptor and long-time resident of Woodstock. He's been in touch with the artist community in Woodstock since the late fifties. Jon has worked with community video programming efforts here on several occasions, and has experienced the frustration of little viewer response and community participation.

Q: Okay, Jon. Your idea of community video, how you see it, what it really is.

A: When I first heard about it, I imagined it could be a kind of mirror the community could hold up in front of itself to mirror its activities, its shortcomings, strengths, have an open mind to itself, a way of conversing with all of its elements. It did not work out that way.

Q.: From where did you get that idea? From what TV was not giving people?

A: It was just what happens when you provide access to a group or community and allow them just to use it. National television is too digested, too remote, too planned-it has nothing to do with real life. To be able to take the same technology into a small town and provide access for a lot of different people and interests seems like a really tremendous opportunity. Most of the public dialogue around here goes down in the newspapers and voting booths. Community TV could be a whole new area for dialogue. Also, I saw a possibility for kids. I think that it's one of the only things we can give kids, to provide an opening to the technology. I think video is the kind of medium kids respond well to and it could create a new environment in the schools.

Q: One would have to conclude that Woodstock community video is not a reality. It's not well supported .

A: I think the lack of community support has to do with the fact that Woodstock has always been a very self conscious town. It's much more involved with its image than its reality. Artists come here not really because of Woodstock the town; it's more because of the countryside, that New York is only two-hours away, and to have a more comfortable life in reach of the city. What's happened in Woodstock is a self conscious thing as to community video. People are more worried about their image than saying what they want to. They are worried about being on it and making a fool of themselves, saying the wrong things, not the best things, like Mary Hartman freaking out on national television. I think most people who have been involved with community video in Woodstock have been involved as a kind of ego trip. There's not the deep consciousness as to the level of communication that can be reached. It's a medium for people to talk to each other. It's also particularly understood in the United States as a means to ratify the need for amusement, diversion, entertainment.

Q: When you say entertainment, that's not to say you can't have entertainment on a local level . . .

A: When I say entertainment, I mean it in the sense of people wanting to forget about their problems.

They would like to be a little bit more separated from reality when they get home from work.

Q: You mean the TV of escape?

A: It's predominantly an escapist medium. I think this community has a very big ego problem on a bunch of different levels. That problem cuts off participation. Nothing seems to be able to get off the ground here. Not for lack of interest, surprisingly, but if something does not happen the way people around here think it should, it does not meet the image, they back off. That's what's happening with Woodstock community video.

Q: I would not say they are backing off. They've never really been there . . .

Right. That's not community video per se. That's with everything in the town. Another aspect is that each faction is closed to every other faction. When you had an artists' program on, people thought it was a bunch of crap with those dirty, long-haired hippies; when there was a cop on, the mainstream watched and the long-hairs did not. I think one would have to cajole the institutions in Woodstock to get them involved. It's a nurturing situation. I don't think Woodstock would jump up and say yes, we want you to do this for us. Over a long period of time perhaps it would catch on.

Q: Do you think it's realistic to consider the possibility that eventually local support would be forthcoming?

A: Yes, but it's like Tom Wolfe when he talked about those guys who decorate their cars and work for a long time without recognition. People expect you to pay almost infinite dues before they accept what you're doing. I think there is a real lack of awareness in the United States as to community consciousness. This community, I see, is so entangled in its money crunch, in its inability to solve its problems, that there is a great deal of moral bankruptcy. I don't think this community can see anything beyond its own immediate needs. It cannot see what could be. Nothing will change until the economy changes. Community involvement will come in only in an affluent time.